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BOOK REVIEWS.

A. BRONSON ALCOTT, HIS LIFE AND PHILOSOPHY. By *F. B. Sanborn and William T. Harris*. Boston : Roberts Bros. 1893.

This is one of the most noteworthy biographies of this biographical year. Mr. Alcott was a unique man, and during his long life of nearly ninety years, while always retaining his intense personality, he was yet the representative of much that was highest and holiest in thought, and noblest in action in his times.

Perhaps nowhere but in New England could the same varied influences have been found and blended into a character so unique and so harmonious in itself. The intense religious life of New England was not so much emotional as moral and philosophical. The delight in the perfect logical sequence of the "plan of salvation" developed a certain metaphysical ability even in the plainest folk. It has well been said that the Calvinist was at once an aristocrat and a democrat. He who was "elected before the foundations of the world" to the highest honors of Heaven, could not feel abased before any earthly dignity, and this gave a sense of self-respect and conscious dignity which suited with the equality of all men before the law. So that not alone from his English ancestry, but from the high thinking of his companionship, Mr. Alcott gained the fine manners which distinguished him. He resembled the Scotch pedlar who, as King James said, "could put his pedigree in his chest, when engaged in his calling, but bring it out when a higher occasion required."

Mr. Sanborn has shown the development of Mr. Alcott's thought and character as even those who have long known him hardly understood it. He passed through many phases of life and thought, and distilled from all the fine spirit of life, which, if at times a little intoxicating, had much of ripe, sweet wisdom, which he concentrated into the Orphic sayings, which remain unexhausted after many years of study.

Belonging to his age, and yet a perpetual protest against many of its tendencies, it is difficult to estimate his influence rightly, and to strike the true balance between the ardent faith of his admirers on the one hand, and, on the other, the indifference, not to say contempt, not of his enemies, for his nature was not prone to warfare, but of those who could not see the real man. But when we remember that among

those admirers were such men as Emerson, Thoreau, Channing, Hedge, Harris, and others of the highest thinkers of his day, with such women as Margaret Fuller and Elizabeth Peabody, certainly nobody can pass by this life carelessly, without seeking to understand how the pedlar-boy of Connecticut became the Philosopher of Concord.

Fortunately, Mr. Alcott believed in records of life and thought, and held his own to be of value, and hence his biographers have ample material from which to draw his portrait. It is good that his features have been painted by friendly, yet critical pens, for it is not cold dissection, but loving insight which reveals the mysteries of human life.

Born in Connecticut, in a farmer's home, but evidently inheriting the constitution and fine brains of an old English ancestry, Bronson Alcott passed his early life in the country, and then started on his career as a pedlar. But his journeyings in this humble capacity were made to minister to his mental development, for he observed men and society, he read all the books he could lay his hand on, and still more, he was thrown into temptation and learned to know his own strength and weakness. He confesses to have committed, on one of these journeys, the only serious transgression of moral law of which probably he was ever guilty in his long and innocent life. Tempted by the desire of seeing the cities and of appearing in fine clothes, for he always had a great love of handsomeness, he used the money, which should have paid for his stock, to gratify his taste, and then, repentant and ashamed, went home to grieve his mother's heart. The sense of this error remained with him for long years and may have influenced him in his working out of the problem of evil, which, Mr. Harris shows, was the basis of his philosophy.

His next pursuit was that of teaching, equally characteristic of New England life, and here he found his true calling. At first, while his diaries are full of earnest thought, they do not reveal the strong peculiarities and extreme following out of new ideas which appeared later. His style of writing is clear and reasonable, and his methods of teaching appear to have met with acceptance. He had already to some extent anticipated the work of Theodore Parker in Theology, and his views of education were akin to those of Pestalozzi and Froebel, as yet unknown to him.

He believed in attraction for the child, rather than coercion, and strove to educate the whole nature, rather than merely to instruct the intellect. The influence of the "Friends," with whom he had passed some time, led him to the doctrine of the "Inner Light," which was strongly in harmony with his own nature.

As he went on developing his own plans of education, he became still more separated from the common traditions, and when he attempted to carry out his ideas fully in the Temple School in Boston, his extreme methods in discipline and instruction failed to win the approval of the parents, or to influence the children as deeply as he expected. It would be very interesting if some of his pupils, now having full experience of life, would tell us how much of value remained to them from his lessons. In addition to the peculiarities of his method, he ran counter to the despic-

able prejudices of the day, by admitting colored children to the school, and he was assailed in the newspapers with wholly unpardonable virulence. He was warmly defended by Mr. Emerson, who always believed in him, loved him, and was his good providence in every emergency.

The story of Mr. Alcott's marriage to one who comprehended his high thought and loved him devotedly through all trials, brightens the somewhat sad history of his failures; and the sonnets, written in old age, in which he recalls those days of early love, are clear and sweet as the song of the oriole amid the blossoming of May.

It was during his early married life that he seemed to lose the just estimate of practical affairs and not to hold an even balance between theory and practice. To this period belong the anecdotes of his odd sayings and doings. He afterwards could look back on these extravagances with a smile, remembering the chill of a voyage on a Hingham steamboat when he was "clothed all" in linen, because he would not deprive the sheep of their covering, and lending money to unknown people without even asking their names, his faith in its return in some cases being fully justified.

The most serious of these experiments, which came near to wrecking his sanity and life, was the attempted colony at Fruitlands, of which his gifted daughter has told the story with all possible humor and pathos in her sketch, called "Transcendental Wild Oats."

But, during all this time he was fully interested in the great moral crusade against slavery, seeing, as clearly as Garrison and Parker, that it was a burden of sin that must be cast off before the nation could be led to righteousness. He took a brave part in the efforts to redeem the victims of the Fugitive Slave Law.

He heartily accepted the movement for the intellectual advancement of women and their admission to the exercise of the right of suffrage, for his pure and spiritual nature made him understand women as fully as they believed in him. There was always a good proportion of women in his classes for conversation, and to the last, young women found in his utterances at the Concord School the same sense of a fresh, reviving spiritual atmosphere that their elders had found from his words, (and they were the same words,) thirty years before.

Beautiful is the story of the family-life, with the generous, warm-hearted mother, who always kept close to her children's hearts, and of the work of the devoted daughter, which at last brought prosperity to all the family and gave the philosopher a serene and comfortable old age.

Mr. Alcott has been called vain and egotistic, but I think he never felt a keener thrill of pride than when he was welcomed in Western schools as the "Grandfather of Little Women."

In his quiet retreat he reviewed the old traditions from which he had separated in his youth, and found meaning and sweetness in much that he had then cast aside. This broad catholicity was misunderstood, and it was often reported that he had

changed his views and joined some exclusive church. But he took no backward step! It was remarkable that with his high standard of thought, his elevation of feeling, his love for order and beauty and handsomeness, which sometimes gave a touch of high breeding, which some would call aristocratic to his manners and surroundings, he never fell into a reactionary spirit, he never lost faith in the heart of mankind. If he believed in a government of the best, he judged of the best by no conventional standards. If his heart yearned for communion with his fellows, he did not purchase the delight by any sacrifice of his own allegiance to truth. But he did love a recipient soul to whom he could express his own thought. And he gained from a sympathy, which was not always accompanied by intellectual comprehension.

The charm of his manners, the sweetness of his disposition, the tenderness of his feelings, and the warmth of his friendships are well portrayed by Mr. Sanborn, who touches his little foibles lightly, only making them serve to bring out his individuality. He also presents a great deal of collateral information about persons and contemporary events, which will have value for lovers of curiosities in literature, but which sometimes impedes the flow and clearness of the narrative.

To Mr. Harris was committed the task, which no other could do so well, of presenting his philosophic ideas in logical order and showing their relation to the systems of preceding thinkers.

Mr. Harris finds Mr. Alcott to be an original thinker of great power, who by his own inward perception of spiritual truths reached the same doctrines which were held by the Neo-Platonists. He was not learned by the scholastic standard, but he absorbed the thought of the writers to whom he was attracted and blended it with his own spiritual life. Mr. Harris reveals a sequence and consistency in his philosophy, which a less acute reader might not easily find.

All Mr. Alcott's theories cluster about the lapse or fall of man from a state of original purity, and he finds the meaning of human life in an effort to return to primitive holiness.

While his expression of this thought is peculiar to himself, one cannot but see how the influence of the Calvinistic theology all about him, (although his immediate connection was with the Episcopal church,) must have prepared his mind to accept this solution of the great problem of Evil.

I well remember an ardent discussion between him and William H. Channing (who was, of course, brought up under Unitarian influences, and who ardently accepted his uncle's views of the dignity of Human Nature), on the expression of Mr. Alcott that Jesus did not descend into the ordinary relations of humanity. "I protest that there is no descent," said Mr. Channing. With the doctrine of lapse naturally belonged the assertion of pre-existence and his views of Temperament and Fate. But Alcott does not narrow his doctrine of the Lapse to a historic sin of one individual, but strives to present it as a necessary basis to creation. He regards the whole series of the lower animals as produced by man and becoming

representatives of his good or evil desires and passions. His vegetarianism is based on his philosophy, more than on hygiene.

Mr. Harris says that at times Mr. Alcott seems to accept the theory of Evolution, but that he repudiates it as the first stage of creation and accepts it only as a moral struggle of conscious beings towards purity and a recovery of lost holiness.

In thus groping after a solution of the central question of the passage of the one into the many, he necessarily takes up many forms of thought and seems at times inconsistent, but it is noteworthy that he never becomes pessimistic in his views and never loses the wholesomeness and sweetness of feeling, which make life serene and beautiful.

The dark shadow of Calvinism is not able to shut out the light of Hope. If man is fallen, his face is again set heavenward, and Eternity of Life shuts out the possibility of Eternity of Hell.

It is useless to attempt to condense Mr. Harris's exposition of Mr. Alcott's thought, for he has done his work with such thoroughness and skill, that no one interested in the subject will be content without studying his own words. Differing, as he does, from Mr. Alcott's views, he gives them their full value and shows the part which his theory has played in the development of human thought.

"The Orphic Sayings," ridiculed by many and understood by few, readily yield up their meaning to Mr. Harris's analysis, and the peculiar use of language having become familiar to us, we read them with a perception of the extent of thought comprised in these few lines, and of their relation to each other.

The careful arrangement of his scales of mental powers is shown to be strictly logical and consistent with his theory.

While Mr. Alcott's want of literary skill has often prevented him from giving adequate expression to his theory, we recognise a commanding control of language in short passages, which are pregnant with meaning, like the text of unpreached sermons. Mr. Lowell's witticism is false, as satire usually is, when he says :

"A lamb among men,
"He goes to sure death when he goes to his pen."

This whole work is an extremely valuable representation of that important phase of the spiritual life of New England called Transcendentalism. Mr. Alcott may never be the teacher of the many directly, but he will be the source from which a few will draw wisdom which will pass into the common life. However succeeding times may regard him, he has had a powerful influence on many of the best minds of two generations.

Mr. Alcott himself would not be indifferent to the fact that the book is a handsome set of two volumes, well printed, with good reproductions of two different portraits of the philosopher, and a view of the Concord School of Philosophy.

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Since writing the above, the last of Mr. Alcott's immediate family has passed away. Mrs. Anna B. Pratt, the oldest and last of his daughters, had just returned

to Concord to make her home there for the rest of her days. She was soon after laid in Sleepy Hollow beside her parents and sisters.

She was the Meg of the famous "Little Women" and possessed in reality all those amiable and excellent qualities which are there attributed to her. Calm in temper, retiring in disposition, affectionate and sweet in character, she resembled her father more than the other children. Justice has hardly been done to her intellectual abilities, which were thrown in the shade by the brilliant achievements of her sister. But she possessed the same vivid dramatic talent, and was a charming story teller, and sometimes her stories were mistaken for her sister's. She had not the ambition and intense energy which Louisa possessed, or circumstances did not bring them out. Marrying early—she was protected for a time from the terrible pressure of need which weighed upon the family, and when left a widow her heart and mind were engrossed with the care and education of her children.

The sad infirmity of deafness prevented her from enjoying fully the social life for which she was otherwise fitted. But she has left behind her a fragrant memory of loving affection and kind deeds in the hearts of all who knew her, and who will always remember her as one of that unique family who have done so much to bless our New England homes, and hold them to "Plain living and high thinking."

Two sons survive her, who are both connected with the enterprising firm of Roberts Brothers, to whom the public are indebted for recognising the worth of Louisa Alcott's work, and publishing it in fitting form. E. D. C.

LA RECHERCHE DE L'UNITÉ. By *E. de Roberty*. Paris: Felix Alcan. 1893.

M. Roberty's "Recherche de l'Unité" is a strange and baffling book which few readers will have the patience to appreciate at its true value. The essay is essentially a critique of the abuse of scholastic abstractions in contemporary philosophising. But the protest against abstractions is couched in so severely abstract a style that it is difficult to seize the author's thought and still more difficult to restate it fairly in simpler and more concrete language.

Rational or experimental monism is the label which M. Roberty affixes to his own doctrine. He opposes it, first, to all forms of confessed dualism, and, second, to the latent dualism which he finds lurking in neo-Kantianism, in Spencer's transfigured realism and in other contemporary forms of transcendental monism.

In his plea for monism he is traversing familiar ground and offers the reader little that is positively new. The monistic thesis can never be proved in the strict sense of the word. The dualist may always affirm, if he will, that for him the universe of experience is a product of two or more ultimate and irreducible factors that have no common divisor. And this view has been maintained by many great thinkers as the only doctrine which affords satisfaction to certain imperious demands of the human heart. However that may be, there are certain equally imperious instincts of the analytic intelligence which it leaves unsatisfied. "La raison sans cesse raisonne," and refuses to pause at any arbitrary barrier. The philosophising